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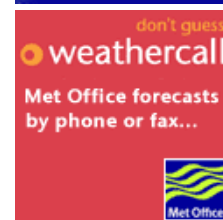
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31 March 2003

This month has been the sunniest March across the country for more than 40 years, Met Office figures released today have revealed. Record-breaking sunshine figures have been experienced in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

In England and Wales there has been an average of 5.41 hours of sunshine per day, the sunniest since records began in 1961, beating the previous record of 5.04 hours in 1995. In Northern Ireland there have been 5.23 hours, again the sunniest since 1961, beating the 4.74 hours of 1982, and in Scotland the story was the same - 4.86 hours of sunshine per day, beating the 4.06 hours seen in 2001.

The long spell of warm, dry weather at the end of the month was the result of an area of high pressure that stayed very close to the UK for more than a fortnight.

Nigel Reed, Head of the Met Office Operations Centre, said: "After the wet, and, sometimes, snowy winter, high pressure brought a pleasant start to spring. It will turn cooler, cloudier and wetter for a few days but another area of high pressure will return by the end of the week."

Notes:

This March has been the driest in Northern Ireland since 1973, with only 40.7mm of rain, just 6.8mm more than in 1973, and 51.2mm less than average. England and Wales had 35.8mm of rain, the driest since 1997 when there was 30.7mm recorded, and Scotland had 71.4mm, the driest since 1996 when 57.7mm was recorded.

Average temperatures have not been record-breaking. The mean temperature for England and Wales has been 7.2 °C, 1.9 °C above average and the warmest since 1998, when 7.5 °C was recorded. The mean in Scotland has been 5.7 °C, 2.1 °C above average, the warmest since 1997, when 5.8 °C was recorded, and the Northern Ireland mean has been 6.7 °C, 1.5 °C above average and 0.1 °C less than last year.

In comparison March in Gibraltar, where the Met Office also has an office, has been a very dull and wet month. The amount of sunshine recorded at RAF Gibraltar during March 2003 was 120.7 hours. This represents 59% of the average of 204 hours. In fact it was the second dullest March since records there began in 1947. The dullest was in 1990 when 119.9 hours were recorded. A total of 148 mm of rain fell, this is twice the average for March. The reason for the lack of sunshine was that there were long periods of easterly winds coupled with low pressure systems over or to the west of Iberia spreading cloud into the area.

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